

LOS ANGELES TIMES

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VALLEY NEWS

JONES: The Stakes at Belmont

Continued from B1

Then the telling moment took place. Not one of the officials accepted even partial blame for the financial disaster the district faced. Each came to the podium to explain that they had arrived late in the decision-making process, that their duties had caused them to be elsewhere when the damage was done, that somehow they were free of the taint.

Remember the old ditty? "Don't blame you, don't blame me, let's blame Jimmy behind the tree." Something like that.

And Korenstein let them off the hook. So did Yuki Castro and David Tokohaky, the other board members on the committee. One by one the bureaucrats approached the podium and, in effect, received absolution. The committee members listened, nodded sympathetically, and declared the meeting over.

Just another hard day of work at the district.

This particular set piece was spookily reminiscent of the description provided by the accounting firm Arthur Andersen in its 1997 audit of district operations. This review, one of the most damning I've ever read, said in part:

"District productivity is hampered by political gamesmanship and the maneuvering of the board, senior staff and their representatives. The lack of trust and respect among peers is evident through viewing their communications and looking at their actions toward each other. Congenial talk with limited real action and an abundance of protective memos seems to be the modus operandi."

In other words, "congestional talk."



The massive half-built Belmont Learning Complex may be demolished if cleanup of the toxic waste site beneath it fails, costing the district millions of dollars.

is used to hide honest criticism and protective memos are used to dodge responsibility. No one trusts anyone but accountability is avoided at all costs.

You wonder how big a disaster will be required to produce a watershed change at the district. The Belmont situation follows a previous attempt to build a Central City high school on the site of the old Ambassador Hotel. That plan also failed and cost the district tens of millions of dollars.

And last year the district found itself with a basic precursor to Belmont when the site of another new school, Jefferson Middle School, was found to contain various and sundry dangerous chemicals. As with Belmont, district officials had received ample warnings of the dangers at the Jefferson site and failed to heed them.

Here's an excerpt from a report on Jefferson by Assemblyman Scott Wideman, the chairman of the Joint Legislative Audit Com-

mittee. (The district) began the process of purchasing the site during the summer of 1986. On Jan. 9, 1989, the California Department of Education approved the purchase of the project . . . despite their

knowledge that serious toxic concerns existed at the site. The [district] conducted what the director of the Department of Toxic Substance Control characterized as an "insufficient" toxic assessment and remediation effort at the

site. . . . At no time did the [district] seek outside assistance as required until forced to do so by the state. So the stories repeat and repeat. They hit the news, make a splash and then disappear.

Please see JONES, B6

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